

**ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION, USE AND REGULATION OF CARAVAN
PARKS (AND CAMPING GROUNDS) IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
TUESDAY, 28 JULY 2009**

SESSION TWO

Members

Dr M.D. Nahan (Chairman)
Mr W.J. Johnston (Deputy Chairman)
Mr M.P. Murray
Mrs L.M. Harvey
Mr J.E. McGrath

Mr D.A. Templeman (Co-opted member)

Hearing commenced at 1.15 pm

MATTHEWS, MR PAT
Plant Manager,
Main Roads Western Australia,
examined:

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee I would like to thank you for your interest and your appearance before us today. The purpose of the hearing is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into caravans and camping. You have been provided with a copy of the committee's specific terms of reference. At this stage, I would like to introduce myself and the other members of the committee present.

The committee is a standing committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of WA. This hearing is a formal procedure of the Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to the proceedings of the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important for you to understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing and Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents during your evidence, it will assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record.

Before we proceed to the questions we have for you today, I need to ask you a series of questions. Have you completed the "Details of Witness"?

Mr Matthews: Yes, I have.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving to a parliamentary committee?

Mr Matthews: I do.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the "Information for Witnesses" briefing sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form today?

Mr Matthews: Yes, I did.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

Mr Matthews: No, I do not think so.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Would you state your full name and the capacity in which you are giving evidence to the committee?

Mr Matthews: My name is Patrick Matthews, but you can call me Pat, and I am plant manager for Main Roads WA. Part of my duties—I do not know how or why—is looking after roadside rest areas.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: What does "plant manager" mean?

Mr Matthews: We have some heavy vehicles, trucks and trailers that are used for road construction and maintenance purposes, so I buy, sell, maintain—or arrange all of this type of stuff.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: They threw in roadside rest areas along with the other stuff?

Mr Matthews: Yes. I do not know why, but that happened a half dozen years ago. I have tried to handball it, but no-one is there to receive.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Would you like to make any opening statement or remarks before we answer any questions?

Mr Matthews: Not really. I am pleased to be here. I guess I understand the reason for it. I have read the terms of reference and Main Roads is some sort of stakeholder here in that it provides roadside stopping places. Our game is to provide a facility for travellers and try to prevent accidents that are caused by fatigue. That is our core business, if you like, and, hopefully, I can answer any of your questions relating to that.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: That would be good.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Pat, could I ask, first of all, whether you have any statistics on the number of roadside rest areas in Western Australia that Main Roads maintains? Is an annual audit undertaken? What is the most recent audit of the roadside facilities; and, if so, to what extent has that been undertaken? That is the information that the committee is interested in with regard to its terms of reference.

Mr Matthews: Unfortunately, I do not have the number of roadside rest areas with me; it is many. We carry out audits in order to provide information to the travelling public. We produce a brochure, which can be found in any of our regional offices. We need to update that brochure every year because things change: sometimes we close some down; sometimes we open new ones. That brochure focuses on our main rest areas, the 24-hour rest areas, and also normal rest areas, rather than parking bays. I think we could provide the committee with the exact number of parking bays, rest areas—short-term stays, if you like—and these 24-hour stays. They are the main ones.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: That would be very helpful.

Mr Matthews: I think we could provide that.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: In terms of the process, you mentioned that sometimes you close some and open new ones, how does the general public have input into suggestions or recommendations? Does Main Roads take submissions from some of our caravan and motor home clubs and groups, and are they considered?

Mr Matthews: Yes, informally. I am not in constant contact with them, but they do give me a call from time to time. Thankfully a lot of the time it is to say thanks for providing a facility, but sometimes it is not. We take the good with the bad. Yes, informally, they do approach us. We leave a web site address in the new facilities, and I often get emails—sometimes complimentary—about those and we take those into account. We work on our stopping place policy, and generally we try to use that as our main guide.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: One of my questions relates to the issue of cleanliness, bins and things. I assume that the local shire is responsible for garbage removal.

Mr Matthews: That is not true. We have a series of term network contracts in place. Part of the duties of contractors in each of our regions is to clean out bins and toilets, and generally to keep them tidy and also to cut the grass to keep them looking pretty good.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: The Caravan Parks and Camping Grounds Act 1995 provides that travellers can stop for 24 hours in a caravan or any other vehicle on a road reserve in an emergency, unless it is hazardous. Does the road reserve include the rest areas?

Mr Matthews: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Does Main Roads have a policy about camping in rest areas?

Mr Matthews: Yes, it does. Our policy, basically, is that if a rest area is signed “24 hours,” then that is what it means; it is an overnight stay. If it is not signed “24 hours” it is a short-term stay. It is fairly loose, I know, and it is very hard to police.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Does that mean if I were driving my Winnebago from here to wherever and after 150 kilometres I was tired and needed to stop, I could pull over and rest because that is an emergency and it is dangerous to drive on —

Mr Matthews: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: — whether or not it is a 24-hour stopping site?

Mr Matthews: That is true. We encourage people to use these facilities because we have environmental concerns when people do not use those facilities. We do encourage people to use them. As I said, we advertise these facilities in our brochures as places where the travelling public can stop. We encourage the travelling public to plan their trip ahead. If it means using our stops all the way up the coast, that is better than driving tired.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I will clarify that. You would not mind me pulling up in the Ford Territory with the 22-foot van and kipping for the night in one of your rest areas?

Mr Matthews: That is right. If it is a genuine fatigue situation, nobody is going to move you along.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Are there any of these stops proposed along the new Perth to Bunbury highway?

Mr Matthews: Not signed “24-hours”, but certainly there are rest areas. I know of at least two and maybe three that are planned.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Are there any north of the Murray River?

Mr Matthews: I think there is one, but I am not certain of that. I am not too involved with that job. In my capacity with Main Roads I was asked about facilities for perhaps two of these rest areas. Whether they have gone ahead, I do not know.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Yes, that is fine.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I am interested in the reporting process. You have already mentioned that it is difficult to police Mr Johnston and his rampant Winnebago as he tours around the state staying in your roadside places. Is any data provided to you by the local shires, rangers et cetera indicating hot spots or places where you have particular problems with your roadsides, such as the Pilbara or the Kimberley? We are getting constant complaints from the local shire about moving people on. Is there anything you may provide the committee that shows some hot spots in the state?

Mr Matthews: I can. It is not really the shire that tells us. We know these spots because we live and work up there. When I say “up there” most of the hot spots are up there, and most of them are beside a beautiful river or a creek. It is not surprising that people do overstay the mark. We do not have the authority to move them on anyway. The local rangers, as you pointed out, do have the authority, but I think they would probably find it an onerous task as well in terms of resourcing. I think we do talk to shires about issues. We know of the issues ourselves. We never chase anyone away though, because it could be a Mr Johnston who is very tired.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I have a copy of a document from your web site, “Roadside Stopping Places” dated 10 January 2008. Would that be your most up-to-date document?

Mr Matthews: Yes, it is.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Section 2.6 relates to rest areas. Section 2.6.2 refers to 24-hour stopping areas and contains three dot points on what is required: have unisex toilets; be at least 200 metres from any residents; and the third dot point is “be away from establishments providing fully serviced or self-contained overnight accommodation by at least 50 kilometres statewide.”

Mr Matthews: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Is that last policy dot point a result of the Caravan Parks and Camping Grounds Act?

Mr Matthews: Yes, it is. Also, it is in our interest. We do not want to compete with anyone, but we want to provide enough facilities. If there is a place over the road where people can stop, then it is pointless our creating more work for ourselves in that area. The resources are better used somewhere else.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Sure. There would not be any 24-hour stopping places in the south west area?

Mr Matthews: No. I am just trying to think of any, but I cannot think of any. Most of them are north of Perth or east of Perth.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: As was said previously, if somebody was too tired to drive on they could pull up in one of your rest areas and kip overnight.

Mr Matthews: As the committee is probably aware there are a lot of parking bays out there, and each one of those is off the road and safe. If anyone in any emergency needs to stop, they are there.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Do you have any caravan dump points? On your web site you have a symbol for a dump site, but the committee secretariat could find only one. Is that the case?

Mr Matthews: Yes, we do. We are developing more of those, again with environmental implications in mind. Also, where we put in new composting toilets, if the caravanners use those to dump their black water waste then it knocks our goodies on the head, so it is in our best interest to provide dump sites. We have been doing that. I think we have something like 10 out there at the moment. Hopefully our next updated brochure will indicate in which areas they are. We try to work in conjunction with local shires, which have them in some towns; and some caravan parks have them as well, because they have the same problem.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Sure.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Do you have any idea of the cost of installing the dump points? We hear wildly conflicting stories from local government about the inherent costs of installing a dump point.

[1.30 pm]

Mr Matthews: Yes. Probably in the order of five or ten grand. It depends if we do it when we have already got a backhoe out there digging a hole for the toilet; then it is a lot cheaper because you do not have to get that specialised plant, and it is usually in a remote location. So it is a bit hard to quantify that exactly, but the hardware costs three or four grand and you allow another two or three for putting them in if your digger is already on site; if not, maybe it is ten grand in total.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Do the policies by the various authorities differ greatly across Australia? One of the things is that people travelling around Australia with their caravan may encounter different policy rules, depending upon the state they are in. So in terms of Western Australia you mentioned the 50-kilometre rule and the types of facilities that Main Roads provide. Does that differ to your knowledge from other states or territories?

Mr Matthews: Not from similar states, no. Queensland and South Australia have quite similar policies and implementation. I am not sure, but maybe Victoria and Tassie would be a bit different because they do not really have remote locations, and they have a lot of towns as well; but I know in outback Queensland and in South Aussie they have a fairly similar sort of arrangement.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Going back to the rest areas policy and that 50-kilometre rule, if regulation 49—I think it is—were abolished, would that change the department's view at all?

Mr Matthews: No, I do not think so. We are not really interested in putting them any closer—that is for sure—because, as I said, we are not competing and we could spend our money better elsewhere in real remote locations. We do not want to put in any more than we have to because to maintain them is the real cost. The installation cost is a one-off, but maintaining happens every year and it is not cheap.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Do you know the approximate cost it costs Main Roads to maintain their roadside annually?

Mr Matthews: I have tried to find it a couple of times but it is not evident. These term network contracts are a bulk monthly payment. The litter run is in it, the toilet clean is in it and it is very hard to extract that data out. I know it costs a fair bit. We have one at Arrowsmith, which is on Brand Highway. It is pretty close to Dongara and it is not a 24-hour rest area, but it has got a toilet. I think it costs us something like thirty grand a year to have somebody go down twice a week to clean up just the toilet facility. As I said, it is not that far away and we have some very remote locations, as you know.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: We have had the DEC in to talk about their estate, as they kept calling it. They have made a decision to remove all the rubbish bins from their camping areas on their estate. Has there been any consideration by Main Roads to removing rubbish bins, because that would then encourage people to take stuff with them rather than leaving it behind?

Mr Matthews: I know some people who would want that but I do not think it is going to happen. We, I think, looked at that a few times and we understand what the DEC are doing, but the main trouble with our rubbish bins is people putting household rubbish in there. That is a real bugbear. If it is just the rubbish that comes from travelling, that is acceptable, but sometimes we find all sorts of things in there. So we did make up signs advising people that that is not on and we try to police it a bit. But I think no, we are going to have bins for as long as I am around!

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Do you have any places in the Kimberley-Pilbara area that you are looking at putting in any more roadside rest areas at present?

Mr Matthews: No. We mainly put new ones in when we have associated roadworks happening. For example the Dunham River had a new bridge two years ago and we took that opportunity while the machines were there to put in a rest area there. That is a lovely location and it is very popular. Most of our resources are going on improving what we have because some of them are pretty grotty, and we are spending a few dollars on improvements and maintaining; but I do not know of any that are planned at this stage.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Is your experience of those roadside rest areas that when the facilities are provided, the vast majority of people will use a long-drop toilet or a composting toilet, for instance, in a rest area; or are you still getting people who will leave their mess behind in other places?

Mr Matthews: Yes, they will use them. The only reason they use the bush is if the toilet is too disgusting; like it has not been maintained or if it is too busy or something like that. We are putting in a new type of toilet, a hybrid one, which is very user-friendly and is virtually odourless. People tend to look after newer, cleaner, better things better than they do older things. So we are having pretty good success with that, and we do get complimented on those types of areas. So we are, as I said, sort of upgrading the old long-drops and trying to put these ones in.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: I bet you never thought you would be giving this sort of evidence to a parliamentary inquiry!

Mr Matthews: No. I think it is under my duty statement as "other duties as directed"!

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Yes.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: It is one of the biggest issues of illegal camping, though.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Yes. We have had raised with us lots of questions about illegal camping; and on the other side we have had RV users come in to talk to us about how they are effectively independent. Their vehicles are quite sophisticated and they are wanting to have a bit more freedom than perhaps happened in the past. So it sounds as if you are listening to both sides.

Mr Matthews : Yes. I think they have both got a point too, and I do not envy your job; but, again, our core business is looking after motorists and their fatigue. I know it might conflict with some commercial interests. Also I know from the motorhomes association that they would like to see one every kilometre, but that is not on either.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: That was another question following on from the caravan and motorhome black-waste dump points. They say that they are rolling out a strategy to help co-fund more of these dump points. Have you got any idea how many they have actually contributed to with Main Roads WA?

Mr Matthews : None to my knowledge. I did hear that they were interested in doing that but to my knowledge it has not happened as yet.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Their evidence to us was that they would provide the cassette but not the installation.

Mr Matthews : Yes. It may have happened but I have not heard of it.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Would your expectation be that a request like that would come through to you or would it be likely to go somewhere else?

Mr Matthews : It may go through to the regional engineer because it is probably based in a region; like somebody wants better facilities in the Pilbara, then they would talk to the Pilbara regional manager and he would then make a decision on a local knowledge basis, but I think I would have heard of it if it has happened.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: We appreciate you having come in. I have just a few things to say. Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence.

Mr Matthews : Thank you very much.

Hearing concluded at 1.40 pm